

16 February 1983

ON PAGE 32

STAT

STAT

The Bulgarian connection—II



**Beth
Fallon**

THE KNOWN evidence linking the Bulgarian secret police, the DS, to the shooting of Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, is circumstantial, incomplete and, in parts, rests on the unsupported word of the Turkish terrorist who shot him, Mehmet Ali Agca.

Agca started talking when Italian police told him his solitary confinement would end, and he would be put in the general prison popula-

tion. It is the assumption of all hands that Agca would be killed in the general prison population, either by co-conspirators eager to silence him or by infuriated Italian convicts who still believe that even crime should stop somewhere. So Agca looked down the road, and talked.

Bulgarian airline official Sergei Antonov is accused of providing "material assistance" to Agca and is under arrest in Rome. Todor S. Aivasov, once the chief accountant of the Bulgarian embassy in Rome, denies he ever met Agca. But his phone number was found in Agca's pocket. Maj. Zhelyo K. Vasilev, former secretary to the Bulgarian military attache in Rome, also denies knowing Agca. But according to Italian police leaks, Agca correctly described one or more of their apartments and had telephone numbers for them. He picked out pictures of his alleged contacts from a pile of 56, and they were the same Bulgarians involved in another plot uncovered in Italy, in which a Bulgarian agent infiltrated the Polish union Solidarity and informed on its members.

Both Vasilev and Aivasov returned to Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, before Antonov's arrest. They admit they know Bekir Celenk, a reputed big-time gun and drug smuggler alleged to be operating with the connivance of Bulgarian authorities. The unsubstantiated account reaching Italian newspapers is that a third Turk, Oral Celik, took Agca to Celenk who offered him \$1.25 million to kill the Pope on behalf of Antonov, Vasilev and Aivasov. Celenk admits being in Sofia while Agca was there, but denies ever meeting him. Bulgarian police are now holding Celenk. Western analysts say this is because he could blow the lid on the Bulgarian drugs and guns trade.

Italian police want Celenk. Bulgaria suggests Italian

officials could interview the people in question there, a suggestion the Italian government is unlikely to accept. Because Agca says these things does not make them true. But he, a convicted escaped murderer from Turkey, stayed in Bulgaria, the most tightly controlled police state in Eastern Europe, allegedly receiving arms and certainly receiving money there. Italian investigators, led by chief investigating magistrate Ilario Martella, a universally respected judge, think it all smells bad.

They are quite right. They are led to suspect Russian complicity because if planned or aided by the Bulgarian secret police, the Russian secret service, the KGB, was certainly involved. The Bulgarians would not dare do it on their own, observers generally agree.

"The Soviets run everything in the country, from the subways to the secret service," says Stefan Sverdlev, a former colonel in the Bulgarian secret service who defected in 1971. Time magazine says western intelligence experts believe that heads of the Bulgarian tourist offices abroad work for the DS, while the officials of Balkan Air, the state airline, "work directly for the KGB".

Antonov, now under arrest in Rome, was Rome station chief of the Bulgarian Airline. "Since the Bulgarian security service is completely under the thumb of the Soviets, the real question is how the Russians use them," says defector Sverdlev.

AFTER A five-day trip to Rome which the American ambassador there, Maxwell Rabb, tried to discourage, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato is convinced of Bulgarian official complicity. He also believes the Central Intelligence Agency is trying to discredit Martella's investigation by formenting rumors that Agca is too crazy to believe; that "the truth can never be known, so why make trouble;" that yes, Agca certainly was a Bulgarian employe in some connection, but not in a big matter like this.

All of which may, when investigated, prove to be the case. But the whole thing reminds me viscerally of Watergate, when "impossible!" and "we can never know" were the tools of the containment policy. Watergate initially was only a cheap, crazy burglary tacitly approved by a bunch of officials with noodles for brains. But it grew out of a pathological fear of enemies and in the end it was the "containment" strategy that did the most damage. The cover-up. The lies. Who, in this new and potentially horrifying instance, could possibly be permanently benefited by such lies?

STAT